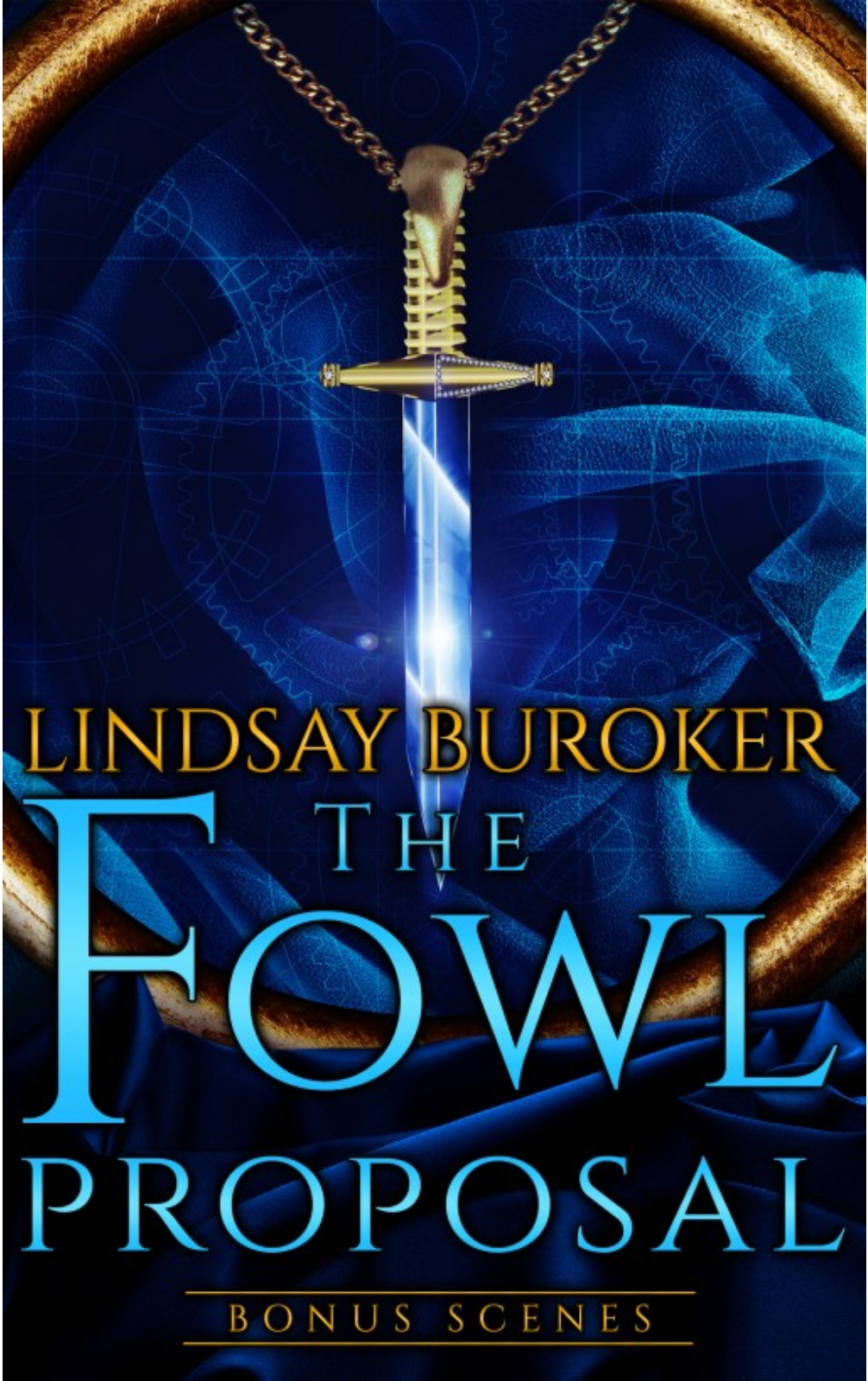
LINDSAY BUROKER
THE
FOWL
PROPOSAL
BONUS SCENES

The Fowl Proposal
(a series of Dragon Blood bonus scenes)

by Lindsay Buroker

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Foreword

This series of four bonus scenes, which take place after the events of Soulblade (Dragon Blood, Book 7) and before Shattered Past (a stand-alone DB adventure with Therrik as the hero), was originally published on my website. Readers asked for a version they could keep on their e-readers, so I've combined the scenes into a short ebook. I hope you enjoy it. Thanks for reading!

Scene #1: Fowl Advice

General Vilhem Ort dismounted in front of General Zirkander's house, removed a thick envelope from the saddle bag, and turned his horse free to nip at the grass on the undeveloped lot across the road. The placid mare would not go far, and the dead-end street had no other traffic to worry about obstructing. *Usually*, it had no other traffic. This afternoon, a couple of other horses were tied to trees at the edge of the lawn, and a line of unfamiliar men and women, some holding children's hands, were queued up on the walkway, as if waiting their turn to get into one of the popular dance halls in the city. Vilhem couldn't imagine anyone voluntarily dancing in the living room where Ridge and Sardelle kept that dreadful couch that had been a gift from Ridge's squadron. Maybe the people were here to see Sardelle for healing.

Vilhem headed for the door slowly, not certain if he should barge to the front of the line, or if those waiting might revolt. He hadn't come on business and wasn't in uniform. As far as they knew, he was nothing more than another supplicant, though he hoped he was fit enough that he did not look like someone who needed a healer's services.

A few people in the back did give him disgruntled frowns as he headed for the door. One lifted a finger, an objection clearly on his lips. Before the woman could speak, Sardelle poked her head outside.

"Ready for the next person," she said, her face pleasant and serene, as was usual for her, but Vilhem thought he caught a faintly frazzled look in her eyes.

"Sardelle?" he asked, almost inquiring if she was all right, but if she wasn't, she wouldn't want to speak of it in front of strangers--or supplicants.

"Oh hello, Vilhem." She smiled at him. "Are you here to see Ridge, or are you, too, coming to see if you've got dragon blood flowing in your veins?"

"I--ah." What? He frowned at the people in line. Did these people think they had the aptitude to become sorcerers? Maybe that was why the children were here. It boggled his mind to imagine people lining up to be tested, perhaps for entrance into Sardelle's up-and-coming mage school, when less than a year ago, people suspected of having magical talent had been drowned or shot. The last he had heard, that still happened in the rural areas and some smaller cities too. "I'm here to see Ridge," he said.

"He's in the duck blind, but he most emphatically told me that this is his day off. It's the first he's had in three weeks." Her smile turned into a slight frown. An accusing one? True, Vilhem was Ridge's superior officer, but he had little to do with all of the work that overseeing the flight academy and the flier battalion involved. Vilhem had been promoted to brigade commander when Ridge took over his old position and knew all about work and infrequent days off.

"It's not about work. Well, it *is*, but I think he'll want to hear about it." Vilhem lifted the envelope. "This morning, our flight engineering team brought in the designs for the new fliers. I thought he'd want to see them. Er, did you say he's in a duck blind?" Vilhem had known Ridge for years and couldn't remember him ever speaking fondly of hunting, unless it involved hunting pirates, smugglers, or imperial invaders.

"Yes, out that way." Sardelle waved toward the large pond that lay at the end of the street, aspens and firs ringing it, though a path meandered along the shoreline. "I believe you're right that he'll be excited to see that envelope." She gave him a more genuine smile, then waved for the person at the head of the line to come into the house.

Since she disappeared inside without offering further instructions, Vilhem headed for the path. As he followed it between the trees and the reed choked shallows, the front yard and the line of people disappeared from view. He soon spotted the low roof of a squatty stone-and-mortar structure with a long rectangular window overlooking the pond. Vilhem did not see a hunter's shotgun sticking out from it. He stepped off the path and onto rocks and branches that had been laid across mud to provide a dry way to reach a low wooden door that appeared to be a recent addition to the back of the structure.

Vilhelm felt silly knocking on the entrance to a duck blind, but he didn't want to be shot by an overly eager hunter, so he did so.

"Come in," Ridge Zirkander's familiar voice came from within.

Vilhelm pulled open the door and ducked his head to peer inside. What he had expected to be a damp hole with a muddy floor turned out to be a surprising cozy little room. A woven reed rug covered the floor and two hideous but comfortable looking lounge chairs had been stuffed inside, along with a side table covered with books and magazines. More books occupied a shelf behind the chair that Ridge sat in, and a phonograph also rested on top. Ridge lounged in civilian clothes in the far chair, a book in his hand, and his leg hooked over one armrest, while the heel of his bare foot tapped a rhythm on the side. A sword in a scabbard leaned against the stone wall beside his chair. Was that Tylie's soulblade? Vilhem had only seen it once, when Ridge had been using it to drive a dragon away from the capital.

"General Ort," Ridge blurted, scrambling to his feet and almost cracking his head on the low ceiling. "I thought you were Sardelle." He started to salute, but seemed to realize they were both in civilian clothing. Three months after his promotion, he still had trouble remembering that he could call

Vilhem by first name now. "Though I suppose I should have realized you weren't. She has a sexier knock."

"How does one knock sexily?"

"Not how you did it. Can I get you something? Beer? Sarsaparilla?"

Vilhem had only intended to stay long enough to drop off the envelope, but he spotted a sarsaparilla bottle on the table by the chair and promptly decided that a drink would be nice. Summer had finally come to Iskandia, and it was warm out there. He wouldn't be surprised to return to the street to find that his mare had wandered into the pond.

"I'll take a beer if you have one." He glanced around, half expecting an ice box somewhere in the room. A cracker tin and a grease-spotted paper bag from Donotono's Bakery sat on the shelf next to the phonograph, but he didn't see any other beverage bottles.

Still barefoot, Ridge padded toward Vilhem. "Beer's on this side." He pointed toward the window overlooking the pond. The water reached halfway up the front wall, with the surface only a couple of feet below.

A few ducks paddled about nearby, not concerned by the chatting men or the window looking out upon them. Someone had cleared the reeds to make a view, but Vilhem did not see any hunting weapons, unless Ridge zapped ducks with the magical sword.

That would be most unsporting, a voice said into his head. *Tylie feeds bread to the ducks, so they swim over whenever a human approaches.*

Vilhem jumped, knocking his head on the low roof. He knew that Sardelle was telepathic, though she didn't make a habit of speaking into his mind, and he'd also heard from the dragon that thought himself a god, but he didn't recognize this voice.

He looked toward the sword leaning against the wall.

Was that you? he asked, feeling silly for asking questions in his mind, but he would have felt even sillier asking aloud, since Ridge hadn't given any indication that he had heard.

Naturally. I'm Wreltad. Tylie left me here, since Sardelle has sent her on a herb collecting task out back. It's a test on gathering ingredients for potion making. I am not supposed to assist, not that I am overly familiar with Iskandian herbs. Nonetheless, Tylie left me here, and I do not mind. Ridge and I are reading a fictional accounting of the first flier squadron. He appreciates my commentary.

I'm... certain of that, Vilhem said tactfully.

Whistling, Ridge grabbed a rope that Vilhem had not noticed, the end anchored inside with something that looked like a cat-shaped bookend. He hauled up a net full of bottles, fished around inside, and extricated one.

"This pond is full of glacier-fed water from the Ice Blades," Ridge said. He used the edge of the window to snap the crown cork off and handed the dripping stoneware porter bottle to Vilhem. "Better than an icebox, since it never needs to be replenished." He let the net settle back below the surface of

the water, weighted down by several more bottles inside. "Have a seat, General." He waved to the chair on the other side of the table from his, one upholstered in a striped mustard yellow and dirt brown fabric. A rip on the seat had been stapled together.

"I think I'll stand." Vilhem nodded toward the window. "Enjoy the view."

Ridge grinned. He had heard Vilhem's disparaging remarks about his couch--all of the couches he'd had. Who knew where he had picked up these chairs? Some house abandoned in the last century, perhaps. Or from a sale at the city junk yard. Perhaps the overseer had paid *him* to take them away.

"Help yourself if you want another drink," Ridge said, waving toward the rope. "Sardelle keeps the duck blind stocked."

"Does she? That's thoughtful of her."

"She likes it when I hide from her students and dragons out here instead of on base. Then when she's done, she can pop out, find me, and we can..." Ridge glanced at the chair he'd offered Vilhem. "Enjoy the view together."

Vilhem found himself even more glad that he hadn't sat in the chair. "She's a good woman. You better marry her soon. Some of the elder gods object to men and women living together when they're not wed."

"Yeah, but I don't follow any of them. I always prayed to Cloud Rider as a boy--imagine that--but I think I may be worshipping Bhrava Saruth, these days. He blessed me, you know."

Vilhem took a slow swig of the beer while he digested that. "You *think*?"

"Well, I'm not sure how legitimate it all is. Just because he says he's a god doesn't make him one, right? I'm not sure on the rules of how one gets deified. He *is* four thousand years old, I understand. Though he slept through most of those years in that cavern."

There is nothing unwholesome about a long nap, the soulblade observed.

Ridge glanced over, the words having apparently been shared with him this time. "I like napping as much as the next fellow." He flopped back into his chair. "Was there something that brought you by, General? Vilhem," he corrected, glancing at the envelope. "Aside from the need to suggest I propose to Sardelle?"

"Yes."

"I want to, you know," Ridge added before Vilhem could open the envelope. "I'm just not sure how. It should be a surprise, right? But she's telepathic, so she usually knows whatever I'm thinking before I do. Oh, she doesn't always monitor me, but Jaxi seems to like fishing around in my head a lot. I'm not sure how I could keep a marriage proposal a secret."

"I... don't believe it has to be a secret," Vilhem said, thinking back to his own proposal more than thirty years earlier. He was fairly certain Anatosia had seen it coming. She had said yes before he even got the promise necklace out. Since he had never remarried again after her passing, he had only the one proposal to draw upon. Perhaps it was too far in the past to be useful to someone today. Times had changed. Still, Ridge was looking at him, his

eyebrows raised, as if he actually wanted some wisdom. Vilhem almost laughed, since that wasn't an expression he ever received from the younger man in the workplace. "You just want to be sure the proposal is welcomed by the other party," he added. "I've heard it's rather painful if you're rejected. Especially if you choose a public place for the necklace offering."

The position of Ridge's eyebrows shifted from one of curiosity to one of alarm.

"I'm certain Sardelle would welcome it," Vilhem hurried to say. "This porter is excellent."

Ridge blinked and looked at the beer. "And that's indicative of a marriage proposal acceptance?"

"I'm sure she would buy you something cheaper and less palatable if she was less enthused with you."

"She doesn't drink beer, so I'm not sure she knows anything about it. She may have just liked the look of the bottle."

"Nonetheless, I believe your odds are good for a yes."

"I hope so. She brought up the subject of children before my little bout with amnesia--" Ridge grimaced, "--so I assume she wants to stick around, but... I really don't know anything about Referatu customs. What if marriage wasn't common? What if they just lived together and made magical babies in a commune? Or what if they did get married, but they didn't use promise necklaces? What if she's expecting some glowing blue bauble?"

Vilhem hadn't seen a daunted expression on Ridge's face often. This was the man who flew upside, shooting down enemy fliers with one hand tied behind his back--or in his pocket, rubbing his lucky dragon charm. He was always confident, whether it was warranted or not.

"There aren't any books around on the Referatu," Ridge went on, "since burning them was trendy for a couple hundred years. My only source would be Jaxi, but if I started asking her about these things, then she'd tell Sardelle, if she hasn't already. Maybe I'm a fool to think I can surprise either of them."

I wish I could be of some assistance, the sword--Wreltad--said, *but I am only familiar with Cofah marriage customs from two thousand years ago.*

"I know." Ridge patted the air toward the sword, then pushed his hand through his hair.

"Ridge," Vilhem said, "have a custom necklace made, with some sapphires to match her eyes, and then take her out to dinner someplace nice, and ask her. I'm positive you won't disappoint her."

"That sounds so bland and trite. Doesn't *everybody* do that?" Ridge dropped his hand. "Er, is that what you did, sir?" He had the grace to look sheepish.

"Yes, only with an agate I found on a beach and had hung from a leather thong. I was a second year cadet at the time and didn't have any money. Our nice dinner was at the fish-on-a-stick hut in the harbor."

"Fish-on-a-stick? And she said yes? She must have really loved you."

"It wasn't that bad. They have outdoor dining and a nice view of the water."

"They have picnic tables."

"That are outdoors with a view of the water," Vilhem said sturdily.

"I got a splinter in my butt the last time I ate there."

"The picnic tables were in better shape thirty years ago. I'm trying to help you, Zirkander. Is this how you treat all of your confidants?"

"No, you're right, sir. Vilhem. Thank you. I appreciate the help." Ridge offered a sad smile. "You must still miss your wife. You were married nearly thirty years, weren't you?"

"Yes. You could have that with Sardelle if it doesn't take you a decade to work up the courage to ask her. You're not that young, you know."

Ridge made a face. "It concerns me when people with gray hair say that."

"She might be less likely to say yes if you wait until *your* hair turns gray."

Ridge touched his temples, as if worried that a proliferation of grays might already be sprouting. "You don't think she likes a distinguished gentleman?"

"I heard that dragon of hers is quite sexy and young when he wanders around in human form."

Ridge scowled. "You're right. I should ask her soon."

"That's what I've been saying," Vilhem said mildly, taking another sip from his bottle. "Here. Before you start planning your engagement, take a look at these new flier specs."

He laid the envelope on the table.

"Oh, excellent." Ridge stopped prodding his hair and slid the blueprints out.

Quacks came from outside of the window, and Vilhem nearly cracked his head when he saw no less than twenty ducks floating in the water. Not only was it clear that they knew the quasi camouflaged duck blind was here, but they appeared quite expectant. Vilhem couldn't believe how close they were. Maybe they had come for the beer.

While perusing the blueprints, Ridge absently grabbed the tin of crackers off the shelf, crumbled some, and tossed them out the window to the ducks. Much squawking and bandying for position resulted.

"There are hunters all across Iskandia who would be chagrined to find out that you've turned your duck blind into a buffet service," Vilhem said, eyeing a duck with beady eyes that was waddling up a branch that leaned against the structure. He ended up hopping onto the window ledge and looking in upon them.

"Tylie started it. She feeds *everything*." Ridge tossed the fearless one a full cracker, which it caught with its beak before flapping back down into the water. "But I'm the one who comes out here, so they expect *me* to provide too."

"You're a softie, Ridge."

"Yeah. Don't tell the Cofah."

You may wish to leave and retrieve your mare soon, General, Wreltad said.

What? Why?

One of the people who wishes to prove to Sardelle that he does indeed have dragon blood is trying to turn it into a frog.

Uh, that can't happen, right?

No, nobody in line has dragon blood. They're delusional. Sardelle is trying to find polite ways to shoo them away. Your horse seems concerned by the man waving his hands.

Thanks for the warning.

"I need to go, Ridge. Bring those prints with you to work in the morning. Let me know what you think. And don't forget what I said."

"That a woman who truly loves you will accept your marriage proposal even if you do it at a splinter-filled picnic table in front of a smelly fish hut?"

"You know, there's a reason so many people want to be on the team opposite of you when you play brisk-ball. Throwing things at you is quite satisfying."

"Good to know, sir. Thanks for the advice."

Vilhem snorted and walked out to save his horse. The ducks quacked at him. Ridge threw them more crackers.

Scene #2: Fowl Friends

Cas clasped Tolemek's hand as they turned off the main street and onto the dead-end road where Ridge and Sardelle lived with a passel of houseguests who ranged from occasional to constant. Tylie, whose birthday it was today, should be excited to see her brother. Even though Cas and Tolemek had leased a cozy house between his lab and the army fort, Tylie still spent most of her time here, wandering around the woods and the pond to collect animal friends when she wasn't busy studying magic. Tolemek kept hinting to her that she could move in with him now that he had a suitable house, but she seemed to prefer this quasi-rural living to the city life. Cas could understand that. She had grown up with room to roam and explore, at least when her father hadn't been stifling her with mandatory athletic endeavors and shooting practices.

"I hope Zirkander doesn't ask me to *make* him anything," Tolemek grumbled. "The pharmacy isn't open today."

"I'm sure he won't," Cas said.

"I don't know how he ever accomplished missions before he had me to rely on."

"It *is* a mystery."

Tolemek gave her the squinty eye.

Cas squeezed his hand and grinned back. She had no trouble seeing

through the grumpy grumble. Whether he admitted it or not, Tolemek had been excited at the chance to escape his lab and visit everyone. Even Zirkander. They hadn't had a mission since their kidnapping adventure in Cofahre, so Tolemek hadn't chatted with many of Cas's pilot acquaintances in several weeks. Even though he pretended to be engrossed in his work, she could tell from how chatty he was when she came home at night that he found the life isolating and a little lonely. Today, he had been the first one out the door, eager to see his sister and Sardelle.

Tolemek's squint relented, and he returned her smile and hand squeeze. "I hope Tylie likes the charcoal set we got her."

"I'm sure she will. Didn't you say that she has paints and pencils, but not charcoal?"

"Yes, Zirkander got her all the paints she could need." His mouth twisted in something between wryness and displeasure.

"Are you irked because she prefers to stay here?"

"No. Yes." He stopped when they reached the house, pausing before turning down the walkway. "When I'm honest with myself, I admit that this is a better place for her, that she needs a mother and a teacher more than a big brother, and Sardelle's a good influence. But that doesn't mean I don't feel some..."

"Petty jealousy?"

"Brotherly interest in her well-being."

"You know she's fine."

Tolemek sighed and led her down the path. "I'm not sure it's right that you're the more mature person in this relationship."

"I agree. You should work on that."

"By gaining in maturity myself or by bringing you down to my level?"

Cas swatted him. "I hope you don't have a potion for that."

"Not yet, but if I can fix Pimples's love life, I can do anything with my powers."

"Megalomania isn't as attractive a quality in a man as you might think."

"No? It gets Bhrava Saruth a lot of belly rubs."

"It helps that he can turn into a cute furry ferret. Maybe you should work on a potion for *that*."

The door opened before Cas could knock on it. There was nobody there, though clanks and voices came from the kitchen in the back.

"Uhm," Cas said. "Do we go in or..."

"It worked." Tylie leaped through the kitchen doorway, barefoot as usual. She skirted the huge couch, its frame made from bullet-ridden crashed flier parts, and flung herself into Tolemek's arms. "Tolie!"

"Someone's working on telekinetics again, I believe," Tolemek said, enfolding Tylie. She was a couple of inches taller than Cas, but still short enough that he could look over her head and smile a greeting to Cas.

"I didn't even bang the door against the wall this time," Tylie told them.

She stepped back, spun a pirouette, then raced back into the kitchen. She linked arms with another girl on the way, someone who appeared to be around fourteen, and who was covered in flour. Some neighbor friend?

"Cas and Tolie are here," Tylie announced, dragging her comrade into the kitchen.

Cas looked down at a couple of cedar siding shingles lying in the flower bed under the wall and had no trouble imagining doors being flung open. Hard.

She nudged Tolemek before he could walk in and showed him the shingles. "Perhaps it's good that she only visits us. You did pay the majority of the damage deposit."

"Hm. This house is still standing. She can't be doing too badly with her studies." He walked into the living room. "Even that couch is still standing. Alas."

"If machine guns couldn't take it down, nothing can." Cas poked a finger into one of the holes in the frame.

Sardelle walked out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. The air smelled wonderful, of cinnamon and cloves, and Cas thought she detected a berry pie of some sort too. Her stomach rumbled in happy anticipation.

"Hello, you two," Sardelle said with a smile.

"You're baking?" Cas asked. "I didn't know, uhm." She paused, not wanting to offend. She hadn't been aware that Sardelle had culinary skills.

"Fern is baking. I'm assisting." Sardelle smirked, implying that this might not be as calm an activity as the words suggested. "There is instruction involved. Fern is concerned that Ridge is working too much and that I'm not fattening him up properly."

Cas blinked, trying to imagine a portly General Zirkander wedging himself into his flier. He was already on the tall side for a pilot, so he had better keep his frame lean.

"His head is already plenty fat," Tolemek said.

Other than the slightest eyebrow raise, Sardelle ignored the dig--she had a way of making an insult, and the person delivering the insult, seem juvenile without saying a word.

Tolemek lowered his head and scuffed his feet on a rug. Juvenilely.

Sardelle pointed toward the pond. "The boys are in the duck blind if you want to relax until the meal is ready."

"Duck blind?" Tolemek asked at the same time as Cas mouthed, "Boys?" Was she supposed to go with the *boys*?

"Why is there a turtle on my cookie sheet?" came a voice from the kitchen. General Zirkander's mother.

Sardelle patted Cas on the shoulder and waved her toward the pond. "Trust me. You'll want to join them rather than--" The squawks of a bird, perhaps multiple birds, interrupted her. She shrugged and stepped outside to finish speaking. "Follow the path there, and you'll see it. You'll probably *hear*

it. The boys are drinking, playing cards, and listening to records. Cas, you're welcome to join us in the kitchen, but the duck blind is a turtle-, kitten-, and raven-free zone. Some visitors find that appealing."

Raven? Had another pet been added to the household since Cas and Tolemek had come out for the barbecue the month before?

"Is it a dragon-free zone?" Tolemek asked.

"Ah, not currently. But I understand Bhrava Saruth doesn't cheat at cards if you distract him with tarts."

"That's... reassuring," Cas murmured. "Sardelle? Was your former life this, uhm, interesting?"

Sardelle's eyes crinkled. "It was more filled with magic, including magical creatures, gadgets, and experiments, than animals or dragons, but it wasn't without its interesting moments."

"Where's my assistant?" Fern called from the kitchen. "Tylie, come carry your turtle out of here. It's licking the sugar off the sugar cookies."

"Give Ridge a kiss for me," Sardelle said and waved them toward the pond before disappearing back inside.

"You better not," Tolemek said as he and Cas stepped off the walkway.

"What? Kiss General Zirkander?" Cas asked.

"Yes."

"I assumed that directive was for you."

Tolemek curled a lip. "*I'm* not going to kiss him."

"Good." Cas linked her arm in his. "I'd hate to spend the day consumed by jealousy."

He snorted, his sneer shifting to a smirk. He kissed the top of her head before they had to separate to weave along a muddy path meandering between reeds and trees. The sound of lively music reached their ears before the duck blind came into view, a stone structure set into the ground between the path and the pond, with a long rectangular window overlooking the water. A sturdy oak door stood open, revealing familiar people gathered around a table that had been pulled into the center. General Zirkander and Bhrava Saruth in his human form sat in hideous chairs, one upholstered in faded stripes and the other in an equally faded floral pattern. Lieutenant Duck, Pimples, and Captain Kaika sat on stumps that had been dragged inside, their shoulder blades pressed against the wall in the tight space. Phelistoth, also in human form, leaned against the wall behind Zirkander and Duck, frowning across the card table at Bhrava Saruth.

Greetings, humans, Bhrava Saruth spoke into Cas's head, and perhaps Tolemek's, as well. *Have you come to renounce your old and useless gods and be embraced to my loving bosom?*

"We came for Tylie's birthday party," Tolemek said, his gaze flicking toward Bhrava Saruth's chest. The dragon, his mussy blond hair hanging into his eyes, looked back at them and wriggled his brows.

"Tee, Ahn." Ridge waved for them to enter. "Pull up a stump."

Cas did not see room for any more stumps. She was small enough to squeeze into a corner, but Tolemek was already hunched low to stand in the doorway, and he did not appear enthused about crawling over Bhrava Saruth's lap to reach what might optimistically be called an opening around the table.

"Here, take my spot." General Zirkander stood up, his own head in danger of bonking the low ceiling, and waved to his chair. "I need to check on Mom and Sardelle, make sure the kitchen isn't on fire yet."

"You know you just want to check on the status of those sugar cookies, sir," Duck said.

Zirkander grinned at him. "Do you object?"

"Absolutely not. I've been waiting for warm cookies. Why else would I come to a teenage girl's birthday party?"

"Because she calls you Wasley and doesn't tease you about your name?"

"Oh, right. That too."

Pimples rearranged his cards and nodded in agreement.

Zirkander started to step around Bhrava Saruth, but the dragon-in-human-form held up a hand. "I believe you lost the last of your fliers and the rules of the game state that you must forfeit a tart."

"We're playing the baked goods version of Sky Riders," Captain Kaika told Cas. "For some reason, the boys didn't want to play the version where you strip items of clothing with each loss."

"How odd," Cas murmured.

"I wouldn't have minded playing that," Duck said, giving Kaika a brief leer, "but I was afraid we'd end up looking at a room full of naked dragon flesh cannons. Nobody wants to see that."

"Not... nobody." Kaika smirked into her hand of cards. "Also, wouldn't they be scale cannons?"

"Depends on what form they're in."

"The dragons never lose," Pimples said. "You'd probably just end up looking at the general's cannon."

"Darn."

An alarmed expression flashed across Zirkander's face, but he covered it by delving into a grease-spotted sack on the shelf next to the phonograph. He pulled out a miniature tart with orange mango pulp on the top and set it on the table in front of Bhrava Saruth. "You'd think a god could make his own tarts."

"I don't have the recipe."

"Well, there's a divine tragedy." Zirkander grabbed a tin of crackers off the shelf and stepped around the dragon.

Cas and Tolemek made room for him to slip out. He only took a few steps up the path before pausing to crumble some crackers and toss them to a flock of ducks that beelined toward him.

Tolemek looked into the duck blind, wearing a dubious expression. Captain Kaika winked at him and patted the vacated seat.

"Maybe I should--" he started.

Cas gave him a shove. "Go play a round."

"You're not staying?" Tolemek frowned.

"I got concerned at the talk of dragon cannons." Cas's stomach was rumbling, too, and she wouldn't mind an opportunity to sneak some warm cookies from the pan. "Here, I'll take Tylie's present into the house and then join you."

"*I* got concerned at the talk of dragon cannons also."

"Tolemek?" Pimples asked. "I have a buddy in the barracks who wanted to know if you make any other types of creams, besides the pimple one."

"Aside from my healing compound and formulas that have military applications?"

"Yes."

"What kind of cream does he want?"

"Something to remove warts. In a... sensitive area."

Cas made a face. This sounded even more alarming than a discussion of dragon cannons.

"Ah. Perhaps he should see a dragon god about that," Tolemek said, though he handed Cas Tylie's birthday present and stepped into the duck blind, apparently drawn in by a chance to talk about the various goos he made.

"I would require a great deal of worshipping to be tempted into healing warts in sensitive areas," Bhrava Saruth announced.

"I don't believe any amount of worshipping would be worth that," Phelistoth said, his always-haughty expression growing haughtier.

"That's because you're crusty and aren't moved by the affections of your followers."

"I don't have followers, nor do I want them."

"Silver dragons are strange beasts," Bhrava Saruth said, then, while Tolemek was picking his way to the vacated chair, transformed into a ferret. He hopped onto the table, then into Captain Kaika's lap, where he flopped down on his back, stretching out and inviting a belly rub.

"Well," Kaika said, giving him a scratch, "I suppose that's better than seeing a naked dragon cannon."

Cas shook her head and backed away from the duck blind. Tolemek no longer batted an eye at magic and dragons, but she found such displays a little alarming. This gave her another reason to go seek out cookies. There wouldn't likely be shape-shifting taking place in front of Zirkander's mother, since the woman did not believe in magic or dragons, and nobody had taken it upon themselves to disabuse her of her beliefs.

Cas headed back toward the house, but paused when she reached Zirkander. He wore a pensive expression as he tossed crackers to the twenty or thirty ducks that had gathered to squabble for his offerings.

"Sir, are you all right?" Cas asked.

"Oh yes. Just making sure they're sated, so the duck blind doesn't get invaded again."

"Invaded?"

"They've been known to come through the window. And around the door." He shook the cracker tin and peered in. "I'll have to resupply soon."

"Does the, ah, ferret not keep them out?"

"The ferret is more interested in being petted than in hunting ducks. Besides, it's not fair to hunt something you've been feeding." Zirkander tossed a few more crackers, then frowned thoughtfully at Cas. "Ahn. You're a woman."

"Yes, sir. I understand Tolemek is pleased about that."

"Let me ask you a question. I'd like the answer from a woman's perspective." He lowered the cracker tin and peered up and down the path to make sure they were alone.

"Go ahead, sir, though I'm not sure I'm a typical representative of my gender." Cas flicked a finger toward her shoulder, where the barrel of her sniper rifle poked up when she was carrying it on a mission.

"You can't be any more atypical than Kaika. She already gave me her answer." His mouth twisted--had he not liked it? "Listen, if Tolemek were to propose to you--"

Alarm flooded through Cas. Tolemek wasn't planning that, was he? They'd only barely moved in together. It was too early to commit to marriage. He hadn't even committed to living in Iskandia for longer than the duration of their lease yet.

"He's not, is he?" she blurted.

"No. I mean, I don't know. If he was planning to, I doubt I'd be his confidant."

"Oh, you might be." Cas let her shoulders relax, though she glanced back to make sure Tolemek hadn't wandered up the path. He might not find her alarm at the subject charming. "He won't admit it, but when you were presumed dead, I think he missed your company."

"He didn't have anyone else to trade barbs with, eh?"

"That might have been it. Others find him too fearsome to barb."

"Since I'm not in the market for zit or wart cream, I'm not too worried about irking his fearsomeness."

"Is that a word, sir?"

"I think so." Zirkander held the tin out toward her. "Want to feed them? They'll befriend you instantly."

Cas considered their beady-eyed observers. "Should that be a goal of mine?"

"Everyone needs more friends." He dumped some crackers into her hand. "About my question..."

"Go ahead, sir. I didn't mean to interrupt." Cas tossed the crackers into the water, avoiding the carpet of algae floating near the edge. Wings flapped and squawks sounded as the ducks fought to get to the crackers first.

"If Tolemek or some other desirable man were to propose to you, would

you prefer it to be done sedately? A promise necklace delivered over dinner? Or would you find it more interesting and memorable if it were done while flying upside down through Crazy Canyon?"

"Uh, I think a proposal would be memorable, either way. Would you want to risk dropping the necklace into the canyon while you're inflicting these aerial acrobatics on Sardelle?"

He frowned at her. "Inflicting?"

"Yes, sir. It's a word."

"With negative connotations."

"That's why I used it. Maybe it would be nice if you flew up to a spot with an amazing view and had a picnic while proposing. But I think it should be a stationary spot. Women don't like to feel nauseated while making life-changing decisions."

A chirping noise came from behind them, and a golden-furred ferret scampered past on its way to the house.

"A stationary spot without ferrets, kittens, or dragons," Cas added. "Something private and peaceful."

"Peaceful?" Zirkander rubbed his head, as if he couldn't imagine a woman desiring such a thing.

A shout came from the house, something about ferrets and turtles and sugar cookies being licked.

"Yes, peaceful," Cas added firmly.

"Huh. I'll consider your advice. Thanks, Ahn." He thumped her on the shoulder and headed for the house.

Cas changed her mind about going in that direction and turned back toward the duck blind instead. If those cookies had been licked by a ferret and a turtle, she was less enthused about them. Besides, she now had a tin of crackers to snack on. At least for the moment. Several ducks waddled out of the water and followed her up the path.

Scene #3: Fowl Revelations

General Ridgewalker Zirkander flopped down in his comfortable-if-hideous chair in the duck blind, groaning as he draped a leg over the armrest and settled in. He had been working non-stop for the last two weeks, and it hadn't been the enjoyable kind of work, such as patrolling the shoreline, hunting down and shooting enemy aircraft. No, he had been lecturing at the academy, choosing graduating officers for the squadrons, training everyone on the new models of fliers that were rolling out, and traveling all over Iskandia for inspections. He'd hated inspections when he had been the one being inspected, and he found the rigmarole even more tedious as a general. Instead of enduring *one* inspection, he had to endure one at every base he visited.

He let his head loll back, too tired to grab a book or the latest issue of *Essential Model Builder Magazine*. Sardelle had left a note in the house,

saying she would be home later. He had been dreaming of shared massages all day and hoped she wasn't as weary as he was, or they would be giving each other rather limp rubs. Maybe a nice nap would reenergize him.

As he closed his eyes, a chorus of demanding squawks started up outside of the duck blind. The fowl that lived in this pond were not blind at all to the existence of the stone structure, and they were probably letting him know that he hadn't been by to feed them for a long time. Tylie should have tossed some crackers out now and then, but perhaps she was busy learning magical things. She hadn't been at the house either, so she might be out with Sardelle.

"I'll feed you after my nap," Ridge called out to the ducks.

Plaintive quacks floated through the window. He swore the little creatures could understand him.

"They've been lonely without their human cracker-delivery service," came a familiar voice from the doorway.

Ridge wanted to sink lower in his chair and hide long enough for his visitor to wander off. But how did one hide from a dragon?

Bhrava Saruth poked his head through the doorway. As was usually the case in the neighborhood, he was in his blond-haired human form rather than in his golden-scaled dragon form.

After many long days of dealing with soldiers and military politics, Ridge doubted he had the energy to listen to a dragon who thought himself a god. Still, it was worth putting out some effort to keep Bhrava Saruth happy and content. He had been instrumental in chasing the enemy dragons away from the castle that spring, and if any more trouble came to Iskandian shores, he would be a powerful ally.

"Hello, Bhrava Saruth. Acquire any new followers?"

"I have indeed. I am very pleased with my progress. I came to share the good news."

Bhrava Saruth ambled inside and flopped down in the other chair, the one with staples in the seat holding the striped fabric together. He did not seem to notice any discomfort. Emulating Ridge, he slung one of his legs over the armrest. He wore grass sandals and cutoff trousers, a hemp shirt with tiny purple flowers sewn onto it, and several beaded necklaces that dangled almost to his waist. Ridge did not comment on the interesting style. He was relieved whenever the dragon remembered to including clothing when he shape-shifted.

"I have acquired three new followers," Bhrava Saruth said. "Two are only children, but they brought me a stuffed dragon toy and sweets. The third one is a voluptuous young woman with very curvy and bouncy--"

"Yes, I remember her," Ridge said, hoping to interrupt before excessive details came out. "You tried to bring her to the house to enjoy those curves."

"Yes, that is she," Bhrava Saruth said with all the shame of a dog thrusting a leg into the air and licking his nether regions. "This is what I came to speak with you about."

"I don't want to hear about your conquests."

"My conquests? In the Cofahre Empire? In my day, I had many when I battled against the imperial dragons and dragon riders who came here to attack Iskandoth. When the humans saw my gloriousness, they flocked to my temple to become my worshippers." He slumped back in the chair and sighed. "I miss those days."

"Because you had other dragons to keep you company?"

"Talon and fang, *no*. Dragons are incredibly uptight and so unappreciative. My human followers were much more enjoyable to be around. I received many toys from children. And many sexual favors from women."

"Not at the same time, one hopes," Ridge murmured.

"No, but all in my temple. Ridgewalker, mate of my high priestess, I've come to implore you." Bhrava Saruth shifted in the chair, turning his striking green eyes toward Ridge, eyes that held such power and magical energy that they made a man shift uncomfortably, no matter what silly things their owner was talking about. They did, indeed, manage to look imploring.

"About what?" Ridge asked warily.

"I wish your help in finding a place in your city where I might build my temple."

"I..." Ridge had no idea what to say. It wasn't as if he was some noble who owned countless properties in the capital.

"Yes, my high priestess said you would be the person to ask."

"Uh, Sardelle said that?" Ridge and Sardelle might have to talk about more than massages when she returned.

"Her precise words were that you would be more the person to ask than she."

"An enthusiastic endorsement then."

Bhrava Saruth leaned on the armrest, his expression very earnest. "Would your military not have land that might be used for such an important structure?"

"Not in the city, unless you want to put it in the army fort." When those green eyes brightened, Ridge rushed to add, "There wouldn't be much room in there. Lots of buildings already taking up space. Buildings full of offices and ordnance and training facilities."

"That is unfortunate. Soldiers lead dangerous lives. It would be most convenient if they could come to me for blessings before leaving on their missions."

Ridge rubbed the back of his neck. "I suppose I could stop by the tax office and see if anyone is delinquent and if the land might be acquired cheaply. I know there was some damage to structures in the Cofah attack this spring. Some of the owners couldn't afford to--"

"Someone comes," Bhrava Saruth announced, looking toward the doorway.

"Sardelle?" Ridge asked hopefully. He could either foist Bhrava Saruth

off on her, or he could clasp her hand and lure her off to the house, telling her to shoo the dragon away so they could spend some time enjoying each other's company.

"It is that strange woman who doesn't believe in dragons. How can you not believe in dragons? Dragons are magnificent. I do not think she will ever worship me."

"Are you talking about my *mother*?" Ridge sat up in his chair. What had brought Mom out to visit this late in the evening? Seven gods, she wouldn't want to spend the night, would she? That would make it awkward if he pulled Sardelle off into the bedroom and shut the door. It was bad enough Tylie lived in the house most of the time, though at least her room was downstairs. "Is she coming out to the duck blind? You should go. Even when you're human, you're too... too... I don't know. She'll think you odd."

"Me?" Bhrava Saruth's green eyes blinked. "Odd?"

Ridge made a shooing motion, but it was too late.

"Ridge?" his mother called from the trail around the pond.

Ducks squawked outside of the blind, and wings flapped. The hungry creatures were probably going to descend upon her. Ridge hopped to his feet and charged through the doorway, not sure if he meant to defend his mother from an alarming flock of ducks or if he meant to keep her from running into Bhrava Saruth. Maybe both. He kept thinking that he should sit her down someday and attempt to explain that Sardelle was a sorceress and that Bhrava Saruth was a dragon, but he didn't know how she would handle that when she didn't believe in the existence of either.

"Mom," he said, nearly crashing into her a step outside of the duck blind.

"Oh, good," she said, gripping his arms and smiling. "You're home. Vilhem said you should be, but you never are. Really, Ridge. I don't know how you plan to father babies when you're so rarely with the lovely Sardelle."

She wore a sleeveless summer dress dotted with tiny yellow buttercups, and turquoise bracelets dangled from her wrists. Bright yellow enamel hair clips with suns painted on them matched the dress and kept back her long gray locks. Ridge briefly wondered if Bhrava Saruth had inspected her wardrobe for fashion ideas.

Ridge shifted strategically to block the doorway--and the view inside. "I don't think the creation of babies will be all that hard when we're ready to, uhm." Hells, he hadn't even planned how he meant to ask Sardelle to marry him yet. Shouldn't that come before babies?

"That's what I came to talk to you about," his mother said.

"About babies?" Why had everyone come to talk to him on his rare evening off? The long days of summer meant that it was still light out, that he could relax in his humble duck blind and enjoy the quiet. He loved his mother, but he loved her more when she was in her house fifteen miles north of the city, and visits were on his terms.

"Marriage, Ridge."

"Oh. I've been thinking about that--"

"You *are* going to propose, aren't you?"

"Yes, I just haven't decided how to do it yet. I... Mom, there are six ducks staring at you." He nodded toward the trail behind her.

"Don't you keep bread crumbs for them? They seem expectant."

"I have some crackers inside, but--"

"I'll get them." His mother patted him on the arm and moved to slip past him. He shifted his weight to block her.

"I'll get the cracker tin and meet you over by that cove with the reeds in it," Ridge said. "The ducks feel safe there, and we can talk while we feed them."

"Don't be silly, Ridge. They're blocking the trail. We'll never get by without a bribe." She tried to slip past him on the other side.

"I'll get the bribe," he said, blocking her again. "Just wait outside, please. I have company."

"Company." Her lips pursed with disapproval. "It's not a woman, is it? Ridgewalker Meadowlark Zirkander, if you're cheating on my future daughter-in-law with another woman, I'll club you in the side of the head with a rolling pin."

"No, Mom. Nothing like that." He grimaced. He was going to have to let her in. She'd crossed paths briefly with the human Bhrava Saruth before, so maybe he could just pass the dragon off as one of Sardelle's colleagues. A quirky and eccentric colleague with eyes that bored into a man's soul while reading his every thought...

"Step aside, Ridge," she said with the same firm tone that she had used to order him to drop his drawers for a spanking.

Ridge sighed and did as ordered. "As you can see, it's not a woman. It's just--"

"Your ferret?"

"Uh?" Ridge peered into the duck blind.

Bhrava Saruth, now transformed into a golden-furred ferret, chittered at them from the chair. He flopped onto his back, legs in the air, and stretched out, displaying his belly.

"Yes, my--ah, Sardelle's--ferret. He scares the ducks away. I wouldn't want him to run out."

Bhrava Saruth made some more noises and gave his belly a pointed look with his green eyes. Those eyes were always the same, no matter what incarnation he was in.

"Do you want to rub his belly, Mom? I'll grab the crackers."

"Hm." His mother bent to stroke the ferret. "He doesn't look like he would scare the ducks, but I suppose he is a predator."

Ridge bit his lip to refrain from saying that she should see what Bhrava Saruth did to sheep.

Sheep are delicious, Bhrava Saruth announced into his mind, drawing out

the last word with his enthusiasm. His head lolled back in delight as Mom stroked his fur.

"About that proposal, Ridge," his mother said. "You should do it sooner rather than later. You don't want to risk losing Sardelle with your reckless career and your cavalier bachelor ways. Does she mind the women who fling themselves at you when you ride past in the city?"

"Nobody's flinging themselves at me these days," Ridge said. "I'm a general now, stately and unapproachable."

"There are duck droppings on your boots, General."

Ridge sighed and shook the cracker tin. "Do you want to help me feed them?"

Bhrava Saruth chittered a protest when Mom straightened, leaving his belly bereft of pats. *You can throw the crackers out the window, and she can stay and attend to my needs.*

She's not going to become one of your followers.

That is unfortunate. She has most excellent hands.

"Do you have plans yet?" his mother asked tenaciously. "Dinner reservations someplace nice?"

"No, not yet." More ducks had gathered in the pond outside of the window and also on the path, so Ridge crumbled crackers to toss into the water. "General Ort suggested a dinner date, but I thought that sounded overly sedate."

He didn't mention that Lieutenant Ahn had also suggested something sedate. Didn't his comrades know that Ridge couldn't do *sedate*? He wanted Sardelle to remember his proposal and to be knocked over by the delightfulness of it. He wasn't convinced that flying upside down through Crazy Canyon and then landing atop one of the slender rock arches spanning the waterway wouldn't be a good way to propose. He could pack a picnic and a blanket, securing them so they wouldn't fall out when his flier was upside down, and they could dine at the peak of the arch. Then he could surprise her with the promise necklace, and they could make love high above the canyon, with the stars and moon shining down upon them. So long as they didn't forget where they were while in the throes of passion, and roll over and fall off the arch, it would be perfect. And memorable.

Perhaps you should have a dragon ally nearby, Bhrava Saruth said, interrupting his daydream. *Thus to swoop in and keep you from falling to your deaths if your mating is too vigorous.*

I'll keep your offer in mind, thank you. Ridge shuddered at the idea of Bhrava Saruth or Phelistoth watching from an adjacent arch as he and Sardelle... consummated the proposal. Did one consummate a proposal? Or just a marriage? He wasn't sure.

"Vilhem is a smart man," his mother said, and it took Ridge a moment to remember what she was responding to. "A woman doesn't want to fear for her life during a marriage proposal. You weren't thinking of flying her

somewhere... untoward, were you?"

"Ah." Ridge thought of his arch, an arch that he could not now imagine without envisioning a dragon looking on from somewhere nearby. "It crossed my mind to take her someplace adventurous."

"Well, uncross it. Goodness. Dinner, Ridge. In a nice restaurant. And don't choose cheap jewelry." She frowned at him, as if he intended to buy some flimsy bauble from the man who sold dragon luck figurines near the army fort. "This is important."

"I wasn't planning to, Mom. I already ordered a necklace. With sapphires, to match her eyes." He didn't mention that General Ort had given him that idea; he would hate to feel unoriginal.

"Hm."

"You don't approve?"

"Sapphires will be lovely, but see if you can sneak some diamonds in there too. Girls love diamonds."

Ridge imagined ending up with some giant, gaudy pendant if he added everyone's favorite gem to the mix. That could end up being expensive too. He was already dipping into his combat pay to make sure he got something of high quality.

"I'll think about it," he said neutrally.

"And a gold chain. You're far too old and established in your career to get away with braiding grass or giving a woman a leather thong. Do you want me to sketch some ideas for you?"

He glanced at the dubious bracelets encircling her wrists. "Thanks for the offer, Mom, but I've already got a professional jeweler working on it."

That earned him another, "Hm."

Ridge was half-tempted to shoo her away so the advice-giving would end, but she had come all this way. He supposed he ought to invite her to dinner--he had noticed some sausage links in the kitchen that Sardelle must have purchased.

Actually, the sausage was a gift, Bhrava Saruth said as he lay contentedly, Mom rubbing his belly. *From my new worshipper.*

The woman or the children?

The woman. She is excellent with sausages.

I bet, Ridge responded, having second thoughts about offering those sausages to guests.

"I could make the reservations for you," Mom offered. "Soon. You are thinking about soon, aren't you?"

Ridge sighed. "Yes, Mom. Soon. Did Dad take you to a fancy restaurant?"

"No, and I've long lamented that. I'm so glad you're a better man than he is, Ridge."

Bhrava Saruth protested when she left him to come over and clasp Ridge's hands.

"Dad didn't propose nicely to you?" Ridge frowned, feeling affronted on

her behalf.

"I actually proposed to him. In the kitchen."

"That doesn't sound romantic."

"No, but I didn't want him to get away on another of his trips before... oh, let's not worry about it. It was a long time ago. I'm far more interested in what you plan with Sardelle."

Ridge had never asked his mother about her proposal, or marriage, or much of anything about how she and Dad had met. Oh, he remembered her sharing a few stories when he'd been a boy, but what boy cared about the romance between his parents? He had never even been comfortable thinking of his parents *having* romance.

"I hope Dad at least accepted in a timely manner." Ridge scooted to the side. "Here, why don't you sit down, Mom? Do you want a blueberry tart? My new aide foisted these off on me, yesterday." He reached for a bakery box on the shelf next to the cracker tin, only to find it empty despite the promising grease spots on the bottom. "Er, never mind. I guess someone ate them." He shot the ferret a dirty look.

Bhrava Saruth hopped onto the table and jumped into Mom's lap as soon as she sat down. He cooed at Ridge, pointedly not looking at the box.

Why can't you be like Phelistoth and just like cheese? Ridge wondered, certain the dragon was still poking around in his thoughts.

You wish me to be like a self-important silver dragon with no sense of humor whatsoever? That sounds dreadful. Bhrava Saruth stretched out across Mom's lap, his furry tail twitching in contentment as she stroked his back. *She may yet wish to worship me.*

Yes... as soon as she decides you exist.

I could prove my existence to her most easily.

Please don't.

"It took some convincing," Mom said. "He had plans to explore the world and didn't want to be tied down."

"How did you convince him?" Ridge leaned against the wall and tossed a few crackers out to the ducks.

"Honestly, I didn't. *You* did."

Ridge almost dropped the cracker tin. "Pardon?"

"I suppose we should have told you long ago, but you never seemed that interested in hearing about our relationship, and he's gone so often that it never really came up. You were at the wedding, dear. In a manner of speaking."

"I... Isn't your anniversary ten... no, eleven months before my birthday?"

"We adjusted the date, dear. Back then, the world was less forgiving of such things."

Ducks squawked, requesting more crackers, but Ridge barely noticed as he digested this information. He supposed it didn't matter that his parents had never told him they had tinkered with their anniversary date, but it seemed

strange to imagine them doing so. He was relieved they hadn't changed his birthdate and that he wasn't older than he thought--that would have been alarming. He did find it distressing that his parents might not have married for love.

"Does this mean that you and Dad wouldn't have gotten married?" he asked slowly. "If not for me?"

His mother spread her arms. "Who knows, dear? I was rather enamored with him. I'm not certain he felt as strongly about me, or that he's ever felt that strongly about anyone. He's easily distractible, you may have noticed."

"Everyone's noticed, Mom."

"But he was handsome and not unkind. Also, despite his distractible nature, he was quite amorous and energetic in the bedroom, so--"

"*Mom*." Ridge resisted the urge to stick his fingers in his ears. Barely.

She shrugged at him. "I was young, and all of my female friends were quite jealous that I'd caught his eye. I felt honored to have been picked."

"To have been picked? Mom, you're not a pumpkin in some farmer's garden."

"Thank you for that, dear."

Human mating rituals sound complicated, Bhrava Saruth announced into Ridge's head. He was sitting up on the table now, probably upset that Mom had stopped petting him. *Not upset... just forlorn.*

"Did you at least... I mean, do you wish things had gone differently?" Ridge wondered how close he had come to not even existing. Handsomeness and energy didn't seem like enough reasons to spend a life together.

"I prefer not to dwell on the past."

He slumped. That sounded like a yes.

"What's important is that you and Sardelle seem to truly love each other. Don't take that for granted and assume she'll wait forever."

"I'm not. I won't."

With dragons, mating is much simpler, Bhrava Saruth told him. *A female goes into her breeding cycle, seeks out a male, informs him that she's chosen him, and then rutting commences.*

Romantic, Ridge thought. *What happens after the rutting? Do you raise the babies together?*

Hatchlings.

Pardon?

Dragons have eggs, and they hatch. Hence, hatchlings. The female is in charge of raising them. If the male comes near them, she'll typically drive him away. She might even bite him. Or bite something off *him.*

Even more romantic.

"I'm glad to hear it." Mom squeezed his hands before letting them go. "I've enjoyed watching you two together. You have something most people can only dream about."

Ridge realized that she must count herself among *most people*. He

supposed he had always known his father hadn't been the ideal husband, if only because he had been gone so much, and Ridge had been disappointed in him more than once, but he'd always thought the relationship worked for his mother, that she had different expectations or maybe that he was less distant with her. It saddened him to learn that might not be the case.

"Are you hungry, Mom? Why don't we make some dinner?" He wrapped his arm around her and guided her to the duck blind exit. "I think we've got some nice--"

Bhrava Saruth hopped onto Ridge's shoulder. *I would be willing to share my sausage with your mother.*

Ridge nearly choked.

His mother looked curiously at him.

"Ham," he managed to say. "I think there's some ham left in the icebox."

Scene #4: A Fowl Proposal

General Ridgewalker Zirkander did not usually pilot his flier over the capital and land in the street in front of his house, but this was a special occasion. He made sure his picnic basket was still secure, then hopped out of the craft, pleased that a couple hours of daylight remained. Once on the ground, he touched his breast pocket--again. The bulge nestled inside reassured him. He had left work early to visit Azerta's Fine Jewelry and pick up the custom-made promise necklace for Sardelle.

A tiny diamond and sapphire sword meant to represent her soulblade, Jaxi, dangled from the gold chain. The jeweler had suggested all manner of decorative pendants from flowers to newly trendy dragons to ancient runes that translated to "love" or "forever," but since Jaxi was closer to Sardelle than any sister ever could be, Ridge had thought the sword appropriate. Besides, it wasn't as if he could have a relationship--a *marriage*--with Sardelle without including Jaxi.

Ridge wiped his damp palms on his uniform trousers as he approached the walkway. He had the jewelry. Now, all he had to do was ask her to marry him.

Should he change into something less formal before asking her to join him? Or would his uniform make him seem more dashing and appealing? He wasn't sure he wanted to deal with all of the buttons if things progressed in the direction he hoped. Nor did he want to lose his jacket over the side of an arch, since it would tumble hundreds of feet into the river that flowed through Crazy Canyon. Despite all the advice he had received on the topic of sedate proposals, he couldn't bring himself to take Sardelle out to dinner and bend a knee next to a candlelit table. His proposal should be epic. Exciting. *Breathtaking*.

I believe you're too late, Jaxi spoke into his mind as he reached for the doorknob.

Ridge froze. His heart might have frozen too.

Too late? he responded, trying to keep the panic out of his mental voice. He had been trying not to think about his proposal plans around Sardelle, since Jaxi was usually at her side and poked into his thoughts more frequently than she did, but that didn't mean he had succeeded in keeping it secret.

You won't need your flier tonight, Jaxi said. *You might as well have come on a horse.*

Ridge tightened his grip on the doorknob. *Are you saying that... Sardelle wouldn't like to go for a ride tonight?*

Not in your flier. She has other plans.

Other plans? She said she would be home this afternoon. Ridge had specifically asked her if she could take a break from teaching Tylie and the two new students she had taken on so that they might have time together. Of course, he hadn't told her why he wanted that time together, just that he planned to come home early to be with her. She had agreed. She'd seemed excited at the idea. Why would she have other plans now?

She got tired of waiting for you, genius.

Tired of waiting? Ridge knew he should turn the doorknob and stop standing there in stupefied silence, but he couldn't quite parse what Jaxi was saying. She couldn't mean that Sardelle had gone looking for... someone *else*. Could she? Yes, they had both been busy lately, but they had been doing the work they loved, each of them, and when they *had* found time to come together, it had been passionate and exciting. He'd done his best to make it so. The absences had only made them value their time together more, or so he had believed.

Yes, yes, she's still enjoying your randy bits and your passion, Jaxi said. *That's why she's waiting for you in the duck blind.*

Oh? Ridge let go of the doorknob and looked toward the pond next to the house. He imagined the comfortable plush chairs inside his duck blind, then pictured Sardelle lounging naked in one, her bare leg draped over one side as she perused one of his model flier magazines...

The model flier magazines are what get you *in the mood, not her. And yes, that is odd.*

Sardelle called it charming.

She's more tactful than I am.

Well, she can peruse anything she likes to get in the mood. Is she, ah, in the mood now? Ridge left the walkway and headed for the path leading to the duck blind, notions of proposals being stampeded out of his mind by more libidinous thoughts.

Not exactly. Better go see her.

Worried about those dubious words, Ridge hurried down the path. Squawks came from the reeds, and he glimpsed ducks paddling toward the muddy bank. Maybe if he tossed the entire tin of crackers out the window, they would be quiet, so he could sweep Sardelle off her feet and into the duck blind, where they could... discuss their magazine preferences.

You're not editing your thoughts for my *sake, are you?* Jaxi asked.

I thought I would keep them tame since you're swimming through my mind faster than those ducks can paddle around the pond.

I'm fully aware that men have lurid fantasies about Sardelle. I've even encountered men who have lurid fantasies about me.

Er, you as a sword? Or you before you became *a sword?*

Trust me, you don't want to know.

You're right. He was far more interested in being lurid with Sardelle. With that image planted firmly in mind, he rounded the bend and strode toward the duck blind door. At least, that was his intention. He froze when he spotted the very large golden-scaled dragon perched atop the stone structure. No wonder the ducks were squawking.

"Are there enemies about?" Ridge asked, slowing to a stop. Bhrava Saruth was always in his human form, or sometimes his ferret incarnation, when around the house. Ridge glanced around, hoping none of the neighbors across the pond could see this.

The dragon lowered his massive golden head, his familiar green eyes gazing intently into Ridge's soul. *Neither Cofah invaders nor pirates are nearby*, Bhrava Saruth informed him. *The ducks, however, are having unpleasant thoughts about me.*

"Perhaps if you threw them some crackers." Ridge glanced at the dragon's wingtips and also at his short arms and long claws. Could dragons *throw*?

Do you think they will worship me if I feed them?

Perhaps in their own fowl way. Ridge smirked at his pun.

Bhrava Saruth merely scratched the back of his neck with a wingtip and looked thoughtfully toward the ducks.

The door opened, and Sardelle walked out, an inviting smile on her face. That looked promising, dragons looming on the rooftop of the duck blind or not. Ridge smiled back.

"I wasn't expecting to find you here," he said, spreading his arms for a hug.

Sardelle wasn't naked, as in the image his mind had conjured, but she wore a lovely white dress with a broad belt that accented her waist and snugged the fabric up nicely to her bosom. Instead of the sandals she had been wearing around the house since summer had fully blossomed, leather riding boots adorned her feet. Probably wise for the muddy path leading to the duck blind.

And for riding dragons, Jaxi said.

Riding dragons? Ridge's gaze lifted toward Bhrava Saruth. One of the large golden eyelids shivered in an approximation of a wink.

Before Ridge could contemplate that further, Sardelle slid into his arms, accepting his hug and returning it with pleasing enthusiasm. The ducks that had been maneuvering through the reeds floated closer, but they did not waddle out of the water, as they sometimes did in their eagerness to receive

crackers. Perhaps the presence of the dragon kept them at bay.

Sardelle leaned back enough to look at his face, her blue eyes as warm and appealing as ever. They crinkled around the corners, and she said, "Your bulge is poking me."

"Sorry, I got excited imagining you in there, reading my magazines."

Her brows rose, and she tapped the square lump in his breast pocket, the jewelry box.

"Oh. *That* bulge." Ridge bit his lip. He couldn't give it to her *now*. He had to propose first, and he didn't want to do that on a muddy path with ducks quacking from the reeds. "That one is for later."

She leaned against his chest. "Should I look forward to seeing it?"

"I certainly hope so." Ridge looked up at Bhrava Saruth. "Are you... uhm, I was going to ask you to fly somewhere with me."

"Odd. I planned to ask *you* to fly somewhere with *me*."

Jaxi's comments about riding dragons returned to his mind. He waffled, disappointed that she'd made other plans for their evening when he had hoped to finally enact *his* grand plan. He thought of the picnic basket in his flier and dinner packed inside, delicious fried chicken, bacon-wrapped and honey-glazed corn on the cob, and chocolate-dipped dragon horn cookies, all specialties of the pretentious but fabulous Brownstone Plaza Delicatessen. Well, perhaps they could share the contents for breakfast.

"I'll go anywhere with you," Ridge said.

I can arrange for that dinner to float along after you, Jaxi said.

Ridge imagined riding a dragon across the countryside with a picnic basket flying after them. He wasn't sure which would alarm the local farmers more.

"Excellent." Sardelle stepped back, sliding her hands down his arms, then holding up a finger as she leaned into the duck blind to grab her sword belt off the closest chair. Jaxi lay nestled inside of the scabbard. Ridge wondered where Sardelle meant to take him that they might need a soulblade.

I am always needed, Jaxi informed him. *I am a necessity. Surely, you must know this by now.*

Of course. Foolish me.

Sardelle looked toward the dragon. "Bhrava Saruth, are you ready?"

One moment, high priestess.

Something was floating out the door. The cracker tin that Ridge kept in the duck blind. The lid popped open, seemingly of its own accord, and several crackers drifted out. They floated over to the water, snapped into small pieces in the air, then descended to the surface. The ducks forgot their alarm over the dragon and zipped out of the reeds to snap at the crackers, devouring the pieces whole.

"We could take my flier instead of your dragon," Ridge murmured, "and not have to worry about him getting distracted."

Then he could pilot. He always preferred piloting to being a passenger.

I am not distracted, Bhrava Saruth announced. As the now-empty cracker tin floated back into the duck blind, he lowered his long neck and head. *Climb on.*

The ducks hurried away, wings flapping with alarm, as that head came close to the ground--and the water. Squawks sounded as they disappeared into the reeds.

Foolish creatures. Did they not realize that I, their god Bhrava Saruth, was responsible for their meal?

"Do you truly want ducks as worshippers?" Sardelle asked as she pulled herself onto the back of the dragon's neck, then scooted down it until she reached his shoulders and could sit astride him. "They wouldn't be able to rub your belly."

That is true. Also, their brains are tiny and incapable of acknowledging my godliness.

Ridge kept a snarky response to himself. After all, he was climbing onto the dragon and putting his fate in Bhrava Saruth's hands--claws.

One wonders what he thinks of our brains, Sardelle said telepathically, giving Ridge a wink.

Since he made you his high priestess, he must think yours is special, Ridge replied, settling in behind her. He slipped his arms around Sardelle's waist. Even though he had ridden the dragon a couple of times before, and knew that Bhrava Saruth's magic would keep them from falling off, a man should never neglect an opportunity to wrap his arms around his lady.

I'm not going to bring your picnic basket if you make me gag, Jaxi said.

We need to find you your own romance so you'll be too busy to comment on ours. I believe Wreltad is the right... species.

Taddy is pompous, smug, and he used to work for the enemy. Also, he hasn't asked me on a date.

Ridge couldn't imagine how two swords could go on a date, but all he said was, *I can speak to him about that, if you wish.*

You can make him less pompous and less Cofah?

I could suggest that he be charming enough that you forget about his flaws.

Has that been your strategy with Sardelle?

That and keeping her delighted in the bedroom.

Can you hear that? The sound of a sword gagging?

Then again, Ridge said, *I may look for a nicer soulblade lady for Wreltad. He's from another time. Probably not used to ladies with such noisy throats.*

The next thing he experienced in his mind was the vision of a sword scowling. Fiercely.

Ridge rested his chin on Sardelle's shoulder. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise. Hang on tight."

"Gladly."

Bhrava Saruth sprang into the air, the reeds and nearby leaves swaying as

his powerful wingbeats created wind. Ridge was tempted to wheedle their destination out of Jaxi, but he kept his mind silent as they soared above the trees at the end of the pond and banked to fly over the city. A few startled shouts sounded from the streets below, but Bhrava Saruth soon took them high enough that they would appear to be nothing more than a bird far overhead.

The air grew chillier as they gained altitude, flying north along the coast, and Sardelle leaned back in Ridge's arms. He thought about looking over his shoulder to see if a picnic basket was soaring along behind them, but he wasn't sure he wanted to see his corn and chicken being treated to such an experience.

As they flew, the sun lowered toward the horizon, turning the waves a burnished orange. Miles passed below, and the beach disappeared, replaced by rocks until the shoreline grew steeper, and cliffs rose above the churning water. Up ahead, the mouth of Crazy Canyon came into view, the river pouring out into the sea.

Sardelle looked over her shoulder, a sly smile curving her lips upward.

Ridge narrowed his eyes. "Did someone blab about my plans?"

Plans for what? she asked innocently into his mind. *Also, hang on tight again.*

Bhrava Saruth swooped down like an osprey angling for a fish, and Ridge's breath caught as the vast blue ocean spread below them and the wind riffled his hair. He did, indeed, hold Sardelle tightly, whether to keep her safe or to keep from falling off himself, he didn't know.

The dragon pulled up at the last moment, his talons clipping the waves, and then they were off in a new direction, arrowing into the mouth of the canyon. As Ridge had done many times with his flier, they swept along the river, up between trees growing alongside it, past looming boulders, and around ancient rock formations. The first arch came into view, the pillars thrusting out of the tops of the cliff walls and rising up until they joined together, forming a curving bridge over the canyon. Bhrava Saruth flew loops around one of the pillars, turning them upside down as he streaked around and around. Gravity should have hurled Ridge and Sardelle into the water below, but magic kept them astride the dragon.

Even though he preferred piloting to riding, Ridge found himself grinning as Bhrava Saruth flew on to the next arch up the canyon, whipping through a maze of rock pillars along the way. Not being the one in control added an unpredictable element, and not being entirely positive that magic would keep him from falling kept his heart pounding in his chest. He wasn't sure if Sardelle was enjoying the experience quite as much, judging by the tense set of her shoulders and the way her nails occasionally dug into his jacket sleeve, but she must not have said anything to Bhrava Saruth, because the dragon raced through the entire canyon twice before flying toward the top of one of the wider arches.

He alighted on it, talons wrapping over the edge. Interestingly, a blanket weighted down by rocks and two picnic baskets stretched across the mostly flat top of the six-foot-wide arch. Two more blankets were folded neatly at one corner. Was that his picnic basket next to the red and yellow one he hadn't seen before?

Naturally, Jaxi spoke into his mind. *Even though you teased me, I'm mature and magnanimous enough not to want to ruin your moment with Sardelle.*

I teased you? Didn't you gag at me?

Yes, but you deserved it.

"This is our stop." Sardelle's braid had come apart, and she tucked strands of hair behind her ears as she peeked back at him. Her face was a tad pale, but she smiled for him.

"That was amazing." Ridge grinned--he had never stopped grinning. "Almost as exhilarating as when I fly."

Bhrava Saruth, who had been perched patiently, waiting for them to get off, swiveled his head around to regard Ridge with his luminous green eyes.

"All right," Ridge amended, "it was *as* exhilarating as when I fly."

Sardelle squeezed his thigh, and they slid off the dragon's back. He landed first, catching her about the waist and eyeing the drop. The arch rose a good two hundred feet above the canyon floor. If that blanket was up here for the reasons he hoped, they could have an exhilarating time, much as he had imagined.

Jaxi, have you been poking through my thoughts and telling Sardelle about what I planned?

Not me. You probably shouldn't let that dragon spend so much time lounging in your duck blind.

"Ridge?" Sardelle had stepped onto the blanket, and she looked back at him, holding out a hand. "Join me?"

Bhrava Saruth leaped into the air, flew down into the canyon, coasted along the river, then disappeared into trees to one side.

"It appears I have no choice." Ridge wiggled his eyebrows at her. "You seem to have kidnapped me."

"Only because I was afraid you'd never get around to kidnapping me."

He stepped onto the blanket and took her hand, nerves starting to cavort in his stomach. Whether Jaxi or Bhrava Saruth had told her of his thoughts regarding proposals, she clearly knew what he had been planning.

"I just wanted to make everything perfect."

"Perfect or memorable?" Sardelle glanced in either direction, the miles of the canyon cutting below them to either side, the setting sun painting the cliff walls red.

"Both."

He nibbled on his lip, trying to remember the words he had rehearsed that morning, while he had supposedly been paying attention to a report from the

Tiger and Wolf Squadron commanders.

Sardelle unbuckled her sword belt, laying Jaxi's scabbard next to one of the picnic baskets.

"Oh," he said, eyeing her waist and wondering if she meant to remove other things as well. "Are we going to forget words and skip right to, uhm."

"I have a few words first." She bent and lifted the lid of the red and yellow basket.

Because he was a gentleman, he didn't use the moment to ogle her backside. Much. "Will Jaxi be watching? Er, listening?"

"She's only here in case we fall asleep, forget where we are, and roll off the rock." Sardelle waved to the drop-off.

"I wasn't imagining that *sleeping* would be the reason might lose track of our surroundings and tumble over the edge." Ridge wasn't sure whether to be pleased or disturbed that Jaxi would be watching over them.

I promise to close my eyes, Jaxi said.

And withhold comments?

Don't I always when you're having tender moments?

Not... always.

During *them, I do. Commentary afterward is fair game. Sardelle and I have agreed upon this in the past.*

Ah.

"You're going to be that engrossing tonight?" Sardelle turned toward him, something clasped in her hands.

"I'll strive to be. It's also possible that our lovemaking will be so vigorous that the rock will crack and break." He tapped the blanket with the toe of his boot.

I can make commentary beforehand, too, Jaxi said.

Such as gagging?

When it's appropriate.

"Then it's a good thing Jaxi is here." Sardelle stepped forward, but she looked down at her hands instead of up at him. "I know it's not traditional in today's Iskandia for men to wear signs that they're married, but among the Referatu, there is--was--a tradition."

"A tradition?" he asked, watching her hands.

"Yes. This is nothing fancy, or pretty, really," Sardelle said. "I made it myself, and I lack your mother's talent, but it does have a little magic to it, a protection. I'm a healer, and I have the assistance of a dragon, for good or ill--" She smiled briefly, even if she still wasn't meeting his eyes. Was *she* nervous? She *never* seemed nervous. "It will basically help protect you from viruses and it will promote good health. And this is my *ziasta*--I'm not sure if there's a word for it in Iskandian, but it's like a mix between an old clan mark and a sigil." She finally revealed what she had been fiddling with, a leather cuff with a cluster of runes etched on the top. She lifted her gaze and met his eyes. "I would be honored if you wore it."

Ridge stood still, staring at Sardelle as the realization slowly came over him that *she* was proposing to *him*.

He *had* once told her that it could go either way these days, with the man or woman taking charge, but for some reason, he had assumed she would wait for him to do it. All this--the ride out here, the arch, and the picnic--had been the very plan he had envisioned, albeit with him piloting his flier instead of Bhrava Saruth flying them. But he'd hesitated to enact it, since everyone had told him that women preferred sedate dinners for proposals. Someone had shared his fantasies with her, and she had done all this to give him the proposal *he'd* dreamed about.

"I..." Touched by her thoughtfulness--and her willingness to endure that crazy ride to get here--he groped for something articulate to say.

"I should warn you that it's more than just a gift. It's kind of like... I'm claiming you. Marking you with my sigil. It lets others know that we're bonded and that they'll have to deal with me if they try to hurt you or harass you in any way." She shrugged. "At least that's what it once meant. There aren't many people left alive who would recognize the significance." That familiar wistful sadness flashed through her eyes, as it often did when she spoke of the people she had lost. "It's the tradition, that's all. A way to protect the one you love."

Love. Ridge swallowed. They had both shared the word with each other before, but neither of them flung it around frequently, and he still felt a charge of warmth when she confessed that she loved him.

As Sardelle gazed up at him, her freckled face as serene as always--though the way she fiddled with the cuff hinted at that nervousness--he realized she must be waiting for an answer. And that he might be making her uncomfortable by not giving her a prompt one.

"I'm dumbfounded, not hesitant," he rushed to say.

"I know."

"You do?"

"Before we left, Jaxi told me to use my mental powers to invade your privacy and investigate your bulge."

"The one in my shirt, right?"

The corners of her mouth quirked upward. "Yes."

"So you know that I'd very much like to marry you, even if it means letting you mark me like the alpha wolf in the pack."

"Wolves scent mark, don't they? I assure you, I only used leather-working tools on that."

"That's a relief." He grinned and reached for it. "May I see it?"

"You may wear it, if you wish. Though you're mine after that."

"Promise?"

"Yes."

"Then put it on me promptly, please." Ridge offered his wrist.

She pushed up his sleeve and slid the cuff over his hand. He tried to

decide if he could feel a tingle of magic, then teased her by giving it a sniff. She shoved him.

"Careful," he said, "you might knock me over the side, and Jaxi would have to get to work early."

"We wouldn't want that." She stepped closer, leaning her chest against his, her curves delightfully appealing, even through their clothes. "Do you have something for me now?" She looked down at his shirt pocket. Bless her, she seemed eager to see what it was--even if she had already *seen* it, in a manner of speaking.

"I do."

Realizing she hadn't precisely said the words he meant to say yet, he delved into the pocket, a flutter of nerves teasing his stomach anew. It was silly. She had already marked him. What did he have to be nervous about now?

"Sardelle?" His voice came out a touch squeaky, and he cleared his throat while he opened the box. He pulled back the lid and tilted the gold chain and the diamond and sapphire sword pendant toward her so she could see it. "Will you marry me?"

"I thought you'd never ask," she said, sliding her hands up to his shoulders. "Truly. I thought you'd never ask."

"Oh, sorry. I wanted it to be..." Ridge looked toward the fiery red sun, only the top quarter of it remaining above the horizon, painting the entire sea crimson. A hawk cried in the distance, probably wondering what humans were doing on its perch. He grinned, both at the amazing view of the canyon and the ocean and at the woman standing in his arms. "Perfect," he finished softly.

"I appreciate that, but I just want to be with you."

He tried to swallow a lump that refused to be swallowed. Since he couldn't find his voice right away, he used the moment to remove the necklace, return the box to his pocket, and secure it around her neck. "You're a rare and amazing woman, Sardelle," he said softly.

I'm gagging again, Jaxi announced.

Sardelle smirked.

"Does she say those things to you too?" Ridge asked.

"About the gagging? Many times a day. If she were human, she would have developed a throat condition by now."

Fortunately, I am a sublime and magical being. And I have no throat. You're supposed to kiss her now, genius.

"I guess that last comment was for me," Ridge said, lifting a hand to Sardelle's cheek.

"Unless you've changed sexes recently, that seems likely."

"My, ah, bulge should affirm that's not the case."

"We're talking about the necklace box, right?"

"Anything else would be crude." He waggled his eyebrows at her.

She snorted and leaned in, lips parting in invitation. Ridge bent his head, and, as they melted together, remembered the first time they had kissed. The warm sea breeze and the last rays of the summer sun were so different from the frigid conditions in that cave high in the Ice Blades. How long ago had that been? Eight months? Nine? Not so long in the grand scheme of things, but they had been through so much that it seemed that he had known Sardelle forever. He couldn't imagine not spending the rest of his life with her now.

"Ridge?" Sardelle murmured, pulling back.

"Hm?" He blinked, disappointed that the kissing had stopped.

"I didn't bring this blanket out here so we could stand on it."

"Oh, I see. Yes, I'm sure we can find a better use for it."

He grinned, and they soon returned to kissing, and other things. Jaxi, fortunately, did not comment until much later.

THE END